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ABSTRACT

This manual is written for adults working in the schools to organize student governments. It is based on the experience of the Youth Action Program (YAP) of East Harlem (New York City) in organizing and developing student leadership. The manual is divided into 10 sections. "Student Government: Leadership and Purposes" explores the relationship of youth and adults. "Organizing A Student Government" outlines the model developed in the YAP project. "School Improvement" suggests the role of student leadership in substantive change. "The School Conference" describes the organization of youth fairs, workshops, and other schoolwide events. "Community Involvement" discusses youth work with public officials and community action and service. "Ritual and Ceremony" suggests the value of pledges, installations, songs, and achievement banquets. "The Role of Adults in Developing Youth Leadership" discusses oppression, "adultism," and youth. "Leadership Training Components" explores the following topics: (1) "Developing a Concept of Good Leadership"; (2) "Taking Minutes and Keeping Notes"; (3) "How to Lead Good Meetings"; (4) "Developing Goals and an Action Plan"; (5) "Creating a Position Paper"; (6) "Mutual Appreciation"; (7) "Mutual Support"; (8) "Self-Estimation"; (9) "Building Alliances"; and (10) "Structures of Government." "Factors Contributing to Success of Student Government" outlines positive conditions. "Special Features of the YAP Model" reviews advantages and difficulties of the program. (AF)

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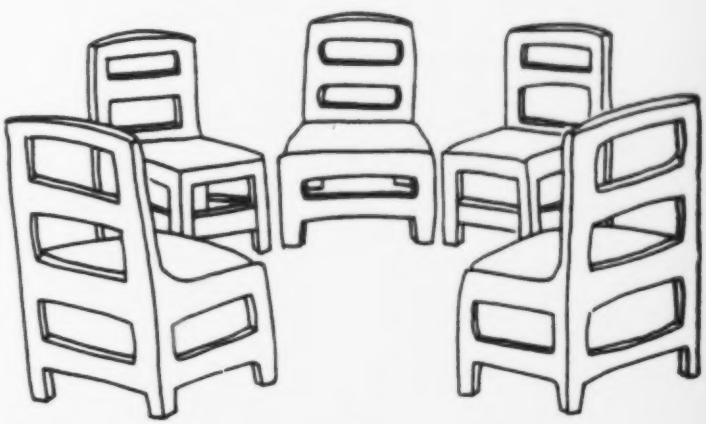
STUDENT GOVERNMENT MANUAL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR



ORGANIZING STUDENT GOVERNMENTS

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STUDENT GOVERNMENT MANUAL

A Practical Guide for Organizing Student Governments

By the Student Government Project
of the
Youth Action Program
of the
East Harlem Block Nursery, Inc.

Made possible with the assistance of
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
1988

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This manual is written for adults working in the schools to organize student governments. It is based on four years experience of organizing and developing student leadership in the schools and of the ten years experience of building the Youth Action Program (YAP) of East Harlem Block Nursery, Inc., in East Harlem, New York.

Since 1978, the Youth Action Program has been helping young people implement community improvement projects of their own design, in the context of a comprehensive youth development program. Our community improvement projects include housing rehabilitation for the homeless, residences for homeless young people and their children, student governments in local schools, contruction of a park, several large community murals, crime prevention patrols, a profit-sharing construction company for the graduates of the construction training program, reclamation of two buildings to create community centers, a coalition which created youth employment programs in New York City, and myriad educational and cultural programs focused on youth development. All of the these projects are designed and governed by young people and are implemented with the help of skilled adults.

Our approach is based on the idea that young people are smart, intelligent, caring and loving individuals who know best the issues and concerns that young people face, and that they can offer clear ideas and solutions to the problems if they are listened to, respected and supported by adults. Young people usually do not have the material resources and practical skills to solve the problems alone. They need the cooperation and partnership of adults.

Our emphasis is on freeing young people from the effects of past mistreatment. Our methods include education, skills development, and leadership responsibilities to help them take charge of their own lives and become effective and ethical leaders, committed to the well-being of their families, their community, and the world.

In 1983, the Youth Action Program sponsored a Youth Conference on Education. One hundred fifty young people attended from 65 schools. Their unanimous recommendation and conclusion was that the best way to improve the schools would be to improve the relationships between students and teachers. The best way to do that, they said, was to develop a mechanism for student input and decision-making, and for regular dialogue between students, teachers, and administration about real issues in the schools.

As a result, the Youth Action Program set out to organize student governments. This effort was successfully begun by Iraida Carrion in 1984, and has been continued since 1985 by Ines Brignoni, YAP's Student Government Coordinator, assisted by Darlene Minor. They set up student governments in four junior high schools in District #4 in East Harlem: Jackie Robinson Educational Complex (JHS 13), Career Academy, Harbor School for the Performing Arts, and Junior High School 45. Maritza Bell joined the staff as a Coordinator of student governments and to develop the East Harlem Association of Student Governments. Ubaka Hill is the Project Director.

The Youth Action Program is proud of all the staff and young people who have participated in this project. We are grateful to the schools mentioned above and their Directors and Principals, and to School District #4 for its cooperation and good work.

Our experience as of this writing has been limited to four junior high schools, with plans to organize student governments in other schools as time and resources permit. However, many of the procedures and concepts could be adapted to the high school level. Each year we continue to learn more about how to organize student governments which have significant impact on schools. The results so far have been hopeful, exciting, and worth sharing.

This manual reflects many years of experience in community organizing and work with young people by the Youth Action Program. Special thanks to Ines Brignoni who, over the past three years, has developed the practical mechanics and methods of organizing student governments and maintaining student leadership in schools. This manual was written by John Bell, a former YAP staff member, in collaboration with Ines Brignoni, Ubaka Hill, and Dorothy Stoneman, YAP's founder.

The contents of this manual include a great deal of practical advice and information, interlaced with some basic concepts and theory. Many sections can stand alone as short training documents. Readers have permission to photo copy sections and use them, adapt them as they wish, simply giving credit to the Youth Action Program.

Over the years, generous funding for the Student Government Project has come from the New York City Youth Bureau, the New York State Department of Social Services, the Hazen Foundation, and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

This manual has been made possible with assistance from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The Youth Action Program is solely responsible for its content.

We hope this manual will be inspiring and useful in your organizing efforts.

STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Leadership and Purposes

The Need For Youth Leadership

The most commonly stated reason for having a student government is to give young people experience in the forms of democratic governance, in preparation for their roles as adult citizens later. This is certainly an important and valid goal.

A more immediate and compelling reason is that, as the main constituent group in a school, students need a legitimate voice for their concerns. Parents, teachers, administrators, custodial and support staff all have their associations or unions to represent them. Likewise, the young people need a real and strong organization to put forth their issues and viewpoints for making the school a better place for all.

Young people are and can become effective leaders. Schools are in a natural position to give young people the skills, encouragement, and experience that will allow them to play responsible roles in solving issues which face them, now and in the future: from improving school lunches to improving education; from stopping gang violence to stopping nuclear war; from eliminating drug abuse to eliminating abuse of our natural environment.

The Relationship of Youth and Adults

Young people have a deep longing to see things right in their world. However, much of their ability to act has been systematically undermined by neglect, disrespect, and mistreatment they receive simply by virtue of being young. Most young people have been allowed very little power to make their own decisions, lead a group, trust their own thinking, know their own capabilities. If, in addition, they have suffered the effects of poverty or racism, they often have an even lower estimate of their abilities to change things for the better.

School can be a place which counteracts these feelings of powerlessness and unimportance; a place where there is true respect for the intelligence, the ideas, the feelings, and the potential power of young people. Most schools, however, fall short of this ideal because of the internal pressures, old habits of thought, bureaucracy, and the wider community's values. A strong and sound student government is a good place to begin to create such a school. Young people, staff, and the community have much to gain.

Unfortunately, in many schools, teachers and students often become embattled. Teachers and administrators may become increasingly authoritarian and defensive; students may become increasingly disinterested or disruptive. The staff often feels at a loss about how to change things. But the source of information and solutions is with the students themselves. If a real student government were expected and empowered to represent the viewpoints of the youth, then students and adult staff would have a much better chance at arriving at mutually beneficial improvements in their shared community: the school.

Purposes of a student government

In order to move the school towards this vision of a working community, a student government needs to have these primary goals:

1) To provide opportunities to young people to develop their leadership skills;
2) To make positive improvements in the school;
3) To improve relationships among the youth and between the students and the adult staff.

ORGANIZING A STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Introduction

There are many ways to design and organize a student government. The model that is outlined in this section was developed through the experience of the Youth Action Program Student Government Project. Our model has proved quite workable and successful. Feel free to adapt it to your particular school.

Summary of Organizing Steps

The steps of initiating a sound student government come under the following headings:

- Assess the needs and interest of the student body and the staff;
- Get and maintain support from administration & faculty;
- Orient the student body to the purposes of student government and the election process;
- Hold a campaign and an election;
- Have a public swearing-in ceremony for the officers;
- Train the student government;
- Do ongoing development and support work.

Needs Assessment

Whoever initiates the idea of creating a student government would be wise to see if there is a real need or enough interest in the school, both among the students and staff, to sustain it. This could be done through informal conversations, a student survey, a poll in homerooms.

Administration & Faculty Support

The teaching staff and administration must understand, agree with, and support the concept and operation of a student government, otherwise it will be an exercise in frustration and futility.

Students might call for a student government, but in most

cases the idea will come from a teacher or administrator, or a staff member of a Community-Based Organization like the Youth Action Program, which is offering to assist the school in developing a student government. A full discussion is necessary to let the staff see the main implications, namely:

- the campaign and election will take a certain amount of school time;
- teachers will need to allow class representatives to report to the class on student government news;
- students may feel safe to raise issues which make staff uncomfortable or annoyed;
- the student government will not succeed without their cooperation.

After thorough reflection, concrete commitment from the school administration could come in the form of designating a faculty advisor/organizer, establishing a meeting time and place for the student government, and securing the resources and funds necessary.

School Orientation

Ideally, students have a primary role in designing the structure and goals of the student government. The Youth Action Program model involves the students from the beginning. First, each homeroom elects two Class Representatives. They need to be students who can and will represent the class well. They must have passing grades, satisfactory conduct, and good attendance. This is the first stage of student government. This group, in consultation with the student government advisor, then plans the orientation process, candidate qualifications, and the campaign and voting procedures.

SAMPLE CLASS REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Attend all student government meetings.
2. Report to your official class all events that occur in the student government meetings.
3. Participate in all activities sponsored by the student government.
4. Encourage your classmates to get involved.
5. Be a liaison between student government officers and teachers.
6. Perform any and all duties deemed necessary for the betterment of student government.

All students in the school need a full understanding of the structure, operation, and benefits of having a student government. This can be provided in a general assembly, in each homeroom, in social studies classes, in posters and flyers, in a letter to each student, or some combination of these. The information needs to include an explanation of the roles and qualifications of candidates, electoral policies, and campaigning procedures.

The Campaign and Election

In conducting a campaign, the following steps can be used:

1. Nominations from among class representatives.

Students interested in running for a school office come from the class representative group. This group has already been selected as a qualified leadership group by the classes. The criteria for candidates and the responsibilities of each officer are set. Potential candidates are nominated by others, or put themselves forth.

SAMPLE CRITERIA FOR OFFICERS

President

- Must have at least an 80 average or better.
- Must have satisfactory conduct and attendance.
- Must be responsible and reliable.
- Must have leadership qualities, and be willing to organize activities and programs for the the student government.
- Must be willing to take responsibility to motivate other students to become involved in student government functions, and school improvement activities.

Vice President

- Must have at least an 80 average.
- Must have satisfactory conduct and attendance.
- Must be responsible and reliable.
- Must have leadership qualities.
- Must be willing to motivate others to get involved in student government activities.

Treasurer

- Must have at least a 75 average.
- Must have good math skills.
- Must be trustworthy, reliable and responsible.

Secretary

- Must have at least a 75 average.
- Must have good reading and writing skills.
- Must be willing to take minutes at meetings and write letters.

SAMPLE RESPONSIBILITIES OF OFFICERS

President

- Coordinates and oversees entire student government structure.
- Shall chair and hold weekly meetings.
- Is responsible for the agenda.
- Is responsible for all decisions made by the student government.

Vice President

- Assumes the duties of the President, in the absence of the President.
- Will succeed to the Presidency if the office becomes vacant.
- Shall insure that the motions passed by the student government are carried out, and shall relay motions and recommendations to the class representatives.
- Shall supervise the coordination of all events sponsored by the student government.

Treasurer

- Shall keep an account of all financial transactions of the student government.
- Shall report in writing to the President each month on the financial state of the student government.

Secretary

- Shall record all minutes of meetings.
- Shall keep attendance.
- Shall write any correspondence.

2. Teacher approval.

Potential candidates must get signed approval from each of their teachers.

3. Student signatures.

Once teacher approval forms are completed and submitted to the faculty advisor, each candidate is given a nominee petition form which needs to be signed by 10 other students who support that candidate's nomination.

4. Campaign Guidelines.

After the signatures are handed in and approved, each candidate is given campaign guidelines and five pieces of poster board (or some such number) for campaign posters, so that everyone has equal advertising space.

SAMPLE CAMPAIGN GUIDELINES

A. There will be a two-week campaign period.
B. You must have respect for other candidates.
C. Honesty is essential at all times.
D. Posters & literature are permitted in halls only.
E. There is to be no discussion of elections during class time, except in homeroom.
F. Each candidate is limited to 5 posters.
G. You will have to speak about your candidacy in a whole school assembly just before the election.
H. Address the issues you care about.
I. Develop a campaign slogan or theme.

---

5. General Assembly.

After two weeks of campaigning, a general assembly is held in which each candidate speaks about why she or he should be elected, and what she or he would like to do to improve the school. Voting by secret ballot takes place immediately after the speeches. An important role of the faculty advisor is to help candidates prepare their speeches.

Public Swearing-In of Officers

Soon after the election there needs to be an all-school assembly to publicly acknowledge and install the new student government. This assembly should include:

- Introductions of each of the officers.
- A Swearing-In ceremony administered by the Principal and, ideally, an elected community official.
- A statement of thanks and of goals by the new President and other officers.
- Appreciations for the other candidates by the officers, teachers and staff, and other students.

This assembly is a very important part of giving the student government credibility and visibility.

Student Government Ambassador

The new student government needs to select from among themselves an Ambassador of the Student Government whose responsibility it is to represent the school at any and all meetings with guests from out-of-town or from other countries. This needs to be a student who is able to speak in public and gets along well with adults and peers alike.

Leadership Training

Once the student government is formed, ongoing leadership training is essential. People are not born leaders. They become leaders through learning, practice, and encouragement. By taking leadership training of the student government seriously, schools can make a great contribution to the development of good leaders, for the present and for the future.

The initial stages of training need to include an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the officers, key functions of good leaders, how to run successful meetings, decision-making processes, setting goals for the school, and building support for each other as leaders.

Later, deliberate training may focus on fundraising, conflict resolution, communication and public relations skills, organizing events, information gathering, building alliances among different groups in the school, the structure of the school system, the structure of local, state, and national governments, and other subjects chosen by the students and advisor.

Constant attention to leadership training will be of great

benefit to both the young leaders and to the school community. The section of this handbook called "Leadership Training Components" contains a series of ideas, training resources, and workshop formats that can be used for different parts of student government leadership development.

******* STUDENTS BUILDING LEADERS ********
BUILDING SCHOOLS

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Student governments often concern themselves primarily with organizing school dances, trips, field days, and other activities to make school more fun. These are valuable and necessary events.

More importantly, however, the student government can play a leadership role in improving the school in substantive ways. There are large issues which affect the lives of students. The student government needs to be the voice of the student body and take the initiative in bringing about needed changes.

Different Types of School Improvement.

Some things can be improved with minimal intervention. In one school, students were upset with how dirty the bathrooms were. The student government leaders talked with the principal, who talked with the janitor, who then kept the bathrooms cleaner.

Some improvements require direct action by many people. Students in one school were upset by the litter, graffitti, and dirt in and around the school. The student government, with the support of the administration, organized a school clean-up day during which the entire student body scrubbed walls, polished floors, removed rubbish, painted over graffitti, and decorated the hallways.

Some improvements need only the allocation of resources to be made. Student government in one school responded to the need for after-school sports activities by getting teachers to volunteer to coach and getting the administration to keep the gym open after school.

Some improvements require policy or program changes by the teachers, the administration, or the Board of Education. Other improvements need a changes in attitudes or behavior. These deeper changes will require a sustained campaign. The student government can adapt the process described below to accomplish a major school improvement program.

Subjective Survey

The first step is to gather information from the students. During homeroom period, Class Representatives can ask each student to write down the answers to three questions:

1. What five things do you like best about school?

2. What five things would you like to see improved in school?

3. What activities or goals would you like the Student Government to organize?

This simple method will provide the student government with a quick assessment of students' concerns and wishes.

Objective Survey

The student government can then select the 15-20 issues or areas of school improvement that occurred most frequently in the student responses to the informal survey. There will most likely be a wide range of topics like class size, the quality of the school lunches, teacher attitudes toward students, racism in the curriculum, student behavior, the condition of the bathrooms, after-school programs.

The student government designs a survey form which lists each issue, then asks the student to check the appropriate box according to whether he or she thinks the issue is 1) very important, 2) important, 3) OK as is, 4) not important.

Again, Class Representatives ask students to complete this student opinion survey in homeroom.

Below is a sample survey form developed by one student government in the Youth Action Program Student Government Project.

SAMPLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SURVEY

Please Make ONE Check on Each Line

	Very Important	Important	OK	NO
Student Involvement in Decision-Making	____	____	____	____
Better Computer Classes	____	____	____	____
Better Sex Education Classes	____	____	____	____
Better Gym Activities	____	____	____	____
Cleaner Classrooms	____	____	____	____
Better Classroom Desks & Chairs	____	____	____	____
School Lockers	____	____	____	____
School Showers	____	____	____	____
Cleaner Bathrooms/Supplies	____	____	____	____
Better School Building	____	____	____	____
Longer Lunch Periods	____	____	____	____
Better Lunch Menu	____	____	____	____
After-School Programs	____	____	____	____
More School Trips	____	____	____	____
Special Needs Programs	____	____	____	____
Better Books and Curricula	____	____	____	____
Curricula That Relate To Real Life & Reflect Our Culture	____	____	____	____
Reading & Writing Classes	____	____	____	____
Teachers' Attitudes Toward Stu.	____	____	____	____
Student Behavior	____	____	____	____
Sports Activities (Male/Female)	____	____	____	____
Smaller Class Size	____	____	____	____
Better Security	____	____	____	____

Statistical Analysis

The student government will now have some statistical data indicating which issues are of most concern to students. A formal summary should be typed up, with many copies made. Student government members should study and become knowledgeable about the results.

Presentation to Staff

The next step is to present the results of the objective survey to the faculty and administration, ask for their comments and suggestions, and request that they list their most important concerns.

Choosing a Focus

With all this information, the student government's next important job is to choose the main issue which will respond to the students' concerns, which is feasible, and which will move the school forward. The student government needs to have thorough discussions about what it will take to tackle the issue, how long it will take, what will be the benefits, who in the school and wider community would most likely support and oppose it, what would the action plan be?

Consultation with Students

After choosing a focus for a school improvement campaign, the Class Representatives then go back to their homerooms to ask the students what they think are the causes and solutions to the issue. The Reps take notes and report back to the student government.

Position Paper and Plan

The student government discusses the input from the homeroom consultations and appoints someone to work with the adult advisor in writing a "position paper". This document should spell out the problem, the root causes, the need for improvement, the proposed solutions, the steps to accomplishing the changes, a time-line, and a budget, if needed.

A draft of the position paper is read and thoroughly discussed by members of the student government. The suggestions and revisions are incorporated into a final draft.

The position paper represents the best thinking of the student body, distilled through the above process. It lays

out the program for bringing about the desired improvement. (For more information on the process of writing it, see the section called "Creating a Position Paper".)

Building Support

The student government members next present the position paper to homerooms, the faculty and administration, the PTA, the Board of Education, and to key community leaders. They should ask for responses, listen with respect, and expect help on the project. In some cases, a school assembly might best "launch" the campaign. (See section on "Building Alliances" for more information.)

Accomplishing the Goals

Each school and each campaign will be different, of course. There is no strict set of rules which insures success. Experience points out some guidelines though:

- Be confident and optimistic when you talk with people about the progress;

- Always listen to people's ideas (and complaints) with respect; every person has something to offer;

- Enlist as much support as you can; ask people to do specific things; appreciate them for their help;

- Keep your supporters well informed about the campaign, and what they can do;

- Revise your goals and strategies to keep up with the changing realities;

- Assume there is always at least one elegant solution to every problem; never despair of finding it;

- Do not give in to attacking those who are opposed to you; the goal is to convert them into supporters to bring about increasing unity behind any improvement;

- Celebrate each success along the way; it helps build morale and reminds people that progress is being made;

- Build opportunities for personal, emotional support for yourselves as you do the work; frustrations, disappointments, and bad feelings may accompany any important effort to change things for the better; care about each other as you go (see section on "Mutual Support").

THE SCHOOL CONFERENCE

"The Youth Fair"

One effective event organized by the Youth Action Program student government Project is the annual School Conference. Students often like to call it a "Youth Fair". The purpose is to allow young people to plan and lead a day devoted to thinking about the important issues which affect their lives: e.g., student-teacher relationships, drug abuse, rape, teenage pregnancy, crime prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, fire safety, child abuse, student rights.

The student government picks a date and gets it approved by the administration. Since it involves cancelling classes for a day, the student government members may need to make a formal proposal and presentation to the faculty and administration to enlist their support.

Class Representatives ask students in their homerooms for topics they would like to learn about and discuss at the Conference.

The day includes a general assembly, skits, workshops, and a luncheon. It may include a youth "Speak-Out", in which a question is posed such as "How can we improve relationships between students and teachers in the school?", or "What can young people do to improve life in the community?". Then students are given a maximum of three minutes each to speak to the student body about their ideas. The first several speakers are student government leaders who have prepared speeches, with the help of the faculty advisor.

The Youth Speak-Out might be viewed by some teachers and school officials as just being a long period of grievancing by students. However, when it is structured as outlined above, we have never seen it turn into a negative event. It most often releases the thinking, the energy, and the enthusiasm of the students. They are being listened to by their peers in a public forum. They have valid experience and brilliant ideas.

The student government plans the Conference in detail. Student committees are formed to handle all aspects:

- choosing the topics for skits, workshops, & speak-out
- designing the program
- inviting the resource people for workshops
- procuring the sound & light equipment
- contacting groups to do skits about issues
- making room assignments
- preparing the luncheon
- keeping the administration informed
- assigning students to workshops
- preparing to be workshop moderators

Prior to the day of the Conference, Class Representatives ask each student in their homerooms to select four workshops from the 8-10 workshops being offered. The student government will then schedule them for three of the four workshops, complete with room assignments, moderator, workshop facilitator, and time.

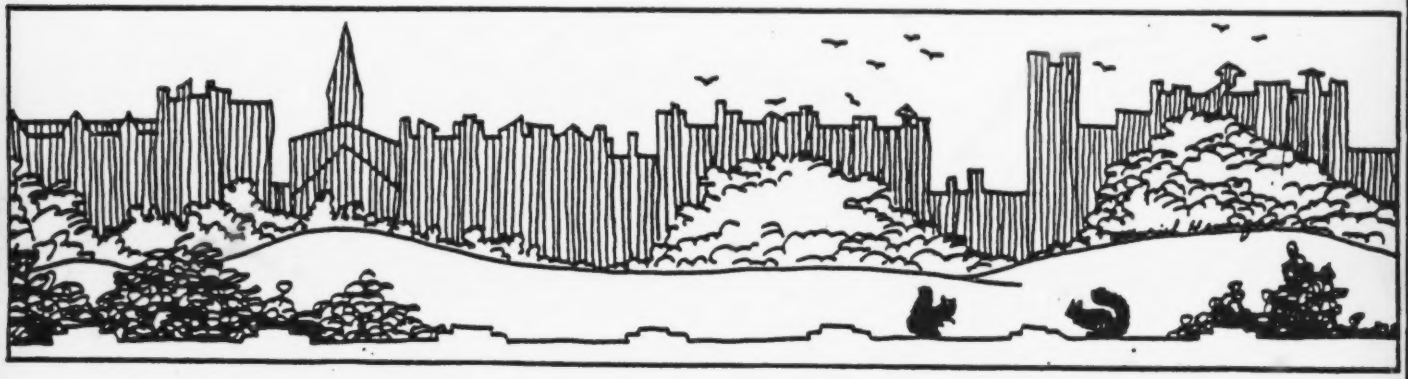
The Conference day begins with a school assembly in which the principal and student government members introduce the themes for the day, and the resource people who will lead the workshops. Skits are then presented which deal with the topics (e.g., student rights, drug abuse, crime, pregnancy prevention). Student government officers follow each skit with the information that there are people and agencies in the community who care about these issues and can help. The last half hour or so is saved for the Speak-Out, if it is included, which is moderated by a student officer. This usually gets the energy flowing.

Students then proceed to their workshops. Student government members act as moderators of the workshops and assistants to the facilitators. The best workshops allow for discussion and participation among the students. Students are also asked to evaluate the workshops.

After the three workshop periods, there is a school luncheon to continue sharing informally, to thank the workshop leaders and the student government, and to close out the day on a positive note.

Feedback from students, teachers, and administrators alike indicate that these annual Youth Conferences make a difference in the life of the school by providing important information, a forum for thinking about issues of real concern, and a high level of student participation. We recommend that student governments organize such events in their schools.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



Once student government is established and functioning well, the next step is to get student government members involved in the affairs of the wider community. Interaction with public officials and participation in community service allows them to deepen their own leadership, to make important links between the school and the community, and to act as a voice for youth in issues which affect their lives. Our work with student leaders has proved this type of experience to be extremely valuable. The following are some examples.

Work with public officials

Elected officials sometimes seek out the views of young people on youth issues. The Office of the Manhattan Borough President organized a Speak-Out on youth concerns. Our student government members participated. On another occasion, they testified before the New York City Council on the need for providing city money for youth employment, an issue which directly affected the young people. Student government groups have visited their state senator's office to discuss a youth agenda. Participation on the youth council of the NYC Police Department has provided a crucial perspective on the relationship between police and students.

The role of the faculty advisor is to look for such opportunities. In many cases, public officials forget to

solicit the thinking of young people, but would welcome the chance. In other cases, many agencies dealing with youth issues do not include a youth viewpoint. To get a role for youth on these neighborhood or city-wide councils may require persistence, but it is a worthwhile goal, and many lessons in leadership will be learned along the way.

Community Action & Service

There are many ways for students to play a leadership role by serving the surrounding community. The student governments in East Harlem have:

- helped to organize a community Youth Conference, bringing together local entertainment, displays about neighborhood services, and speak-outs on issues;

- participated in a city-wide citizens' coalition to improve education in New York;

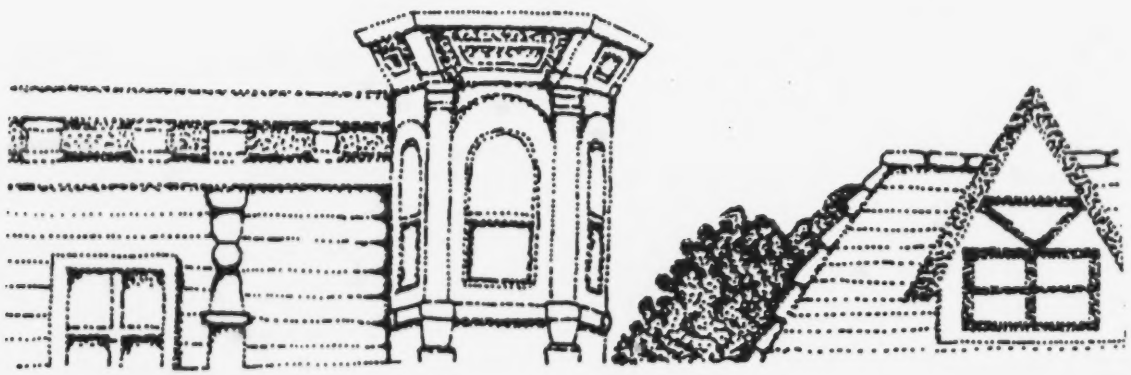
- organized Thanksgiving and Christmas food drives, and distributed the food to the homeless shelters and churches in the community;

- initiated a neighborhood clean-up campaign;

- joined a city-wide housing coalition.

All of these activities increased the visibility and credibility of the student leadership, and helped individuals grow in their understanding and skills.

These three components of community involvement for student government members, namely, getting the youth voice heard, becoming more informed about the way government works, and serving the community, deserve attention and development.



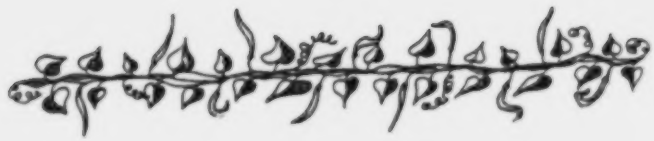
RITUAL & CEREMONY

Rituals and ceremonies add richness and importance to student government events, and provide opportunities to emphasize and repeat positive values and school themes. Students like them very much. Pledges, installation ceremonies, songs, achievement banquets and the like provide a symbolic dimension to the lives of students. There need to be school assemblies in which students receive "certificates of award" and get public recognition for their successes or service. It is always good to try to have a locally elected official present the awards. These are opportunities for inspiration, for building self-esteem, for placing student activities in a larger context.

What follow are examples of such rituals and ceremonies developed by Youth Action Program youth and staff. In creating your own ceremonies, it is crucial that the young people participate in forming and approving them.

Student Government Oath of Office

I, _____, pledge to do my best, to faithfully perform my duties as Student Government _____. I commit myself to set a good example of honest leadership, to respect others and to create unity at Junior High School _____. I will do these things by attending classes and completing my school work, by working together with my fellow students, teachers, and administrators, and by doing my part to motivate all the students to make this the best school it can be.



Installation of Student Officers

The ceremony uses the symbolism of colors. Each officer has a candle and corsage or boutonniere of a different color at the swearing-in ceremony. The presiding official reads the following text.

RED for PRESIDENT

The color Red symbolizes strength and courage in Leadership. As President, _____ will be called upon to exercise the strength of his/her convictions so that he/she may see the job carried through to its end. _____ will also need courage to continue doing the best he/she can for Junior High School_____.

WHITE for VICE PRESIDENT

The color White is the symbol of purity and dedication. As Vice President, _____ will need to be dedicated and her/his role as assistant to the President. She/he will be called upon to help make decisions and recommendations that are a vital part of our Student Government.

YELLOW for SECRETARY

The color Yellow symbolizes light, knowledge, and ability. As Secretary, _____ will be called to use his/her writing skills to keep an accurate record of all Student Government meetings.

GREEN for TREASURER

The color Green symbolizes honesty and integrity. As Treasurer, _____ will be called upon to assist all members of the Student Government. He/She will be required to keep an honest and accurate account of all Student Government finances. It is a demanding and important responsibility.

The Youth Action Program Pledge

We, the members of the Youth Action Program, pledge that we are working together:

- to improve and rebuild our community
- to relate to each other in cooperative ways
- to develop our potential as leaders
- to educate and improve ourselves and help others along the way
- to respect our peers, neighbors, and all life
- to be part of a great movement for justice, equality, and peace.

All this we will do with love and with dignity.

The Leaders' Song

Forward young people
Forward young people
Leaders building minds
Building communities
Together we will stand
With our families
From Harlem to the Bronx
And countries overseas
Together we will build
With love and dignity
Forward young people
Forward young people

THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN DEVELOPING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Adults play the key role in identifying, nurturing, educating, encouraging, counseling, advising, and inpiring young leaders.

There is no point in underestimating or under stating the importance of adults. The dominance of adults as authorities in our society and schools and as the givers of approval is thoroughgoing. There is also a widespread shortage of adults who are available for real friendships with young people. There is a yearning among young people, often unconscious, for a relationship with an adult who could be trusted with confidential information, who could lend a hand, provide guidance and reassurance, and lift adolescent depression with caring confidence.

Adults are key to the success of student government and in particular in the development of leadership among the youth. It is helpful, therefore, for us to understand the concept of "adultism": attitudes we have toward young people which we take for granted but that turn out to be oppressive.

Oppression

We are using the word "oppression" to mean the systematic mistreatment of one group of people by another, where that mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws,

customs and attitudes.

Most of us have been oppressed in different identities: as women, as workers, as people of color, as Jews, as gay men or lesbians, etc. All of us were oppressed first as children and as young people.

If you think of it, except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, young people's lives are more controlled than those of any other group in society. Their opinions are not valued; they are punished at the will or whim of adults; their emotions are considered "immature."

In addition, adults reserve the right to punish, threaten, hit, take away "privileges," and ostracize young people when they consider it beneficial in controlling them or "disciplining" them. Children are, by and large, considered the possessions of their parents, much as women used to be considered the possessions of their husbands, and Black slaves the possessions of their White "masters."

If this were a description of the way a group of adults were treated, we would all easily agree that their oppression would be almost total. But the adult world does not consider this treatment of young people oppressive because we are soaked with it ourselves. We were treated in much the same way. For this reason we need to hold adultism up to a strong light.

The Heart of It

The essence of adultism is disrespect by the adult world towards the intelligence, capabilities, judgment, emotional life, leadership, and physical being of young people. Young people are considered to be less important and in a sense inferior to adults. The adult world cannot seem to trust young people's ability to make intelligent decisions and develop creative solutions for the issues affecting their lives.

Examples of Adultism

In schools, the details of the lives of students are subject to incredible control: hall passes, detention, suspension, expulsion, and other penalties. Any community certainly needs rules to live by, but the rules in most school communities are imposed on young people and enforced by the adult staff.

Consider these examples:

- Students have little or no choice in what to study. They are expected to do all the assignments even if they do not make sense or are insulting to a student's intelligence. They are often punished if they do not do their homework.

- Teachers sometimes yell at students with impunity but students are disciplined if they yell at teachers.

- In a situation where it is a teacher's word against a student's word, the adult is usually believed by the authorities.

- Young people are sometimes punished unfairly at the whim or frustration of the adults. Furthermore, if the student protests against the mistreatment, he or she is often subjected to more punishment.

- Teachers can often be seen grabbing things out of students hands without asking--something they would not think of doing to another adult.

- Young people are often gratuitiously insulted, ridiculed, embarrassed in public, or talked down to by adults.

- Young people are sometimes ordered to do things or given rules with no explanation.

- Some adults do not really listen to young people, do not take the concerns of young people as seriously as they would an adult's, and have a hard time hearing the thinking of young people as worthy of adult respect, let alone on a par with the quality of adult thinking. Yet young people are expected to listen to adults all the time.

- The students are routinely evaluated by teachers, but not the other way around. Through this grading process, young people are conditioned to accept outside evaluation of their work, their performance, their thinking, and, eventually, of themselves.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S

Bill of Rights

We The People of New York State Believe In The Right of Every Child To:

1. Affection, Love, Guidance and Understanding from parents and teachers.
2. Adequate Nutrition and Medical care to aid mental, physical and social growth.
3. Free education to develop individual abilities and to become a useful member of society.
4. Special care, if handicapped.
5. Opportunity for recreation in a wholesome, well-rounded environment.
6. An environment that reflects peace and mutual concern.
7. The opportunity for sound moral development.
8. Constructive discipline to help develop responsibility and character.
9. Good adult examples to follow.
10. A future commensurate with abilities and aspirations.
11. Enjoyment of all these rights, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national or social origin.

- Young people have no real power in the important decisions that affect their lives in school.

- In the larger world, there are few socially responsible, productive, and connected roles for young people in most societies, certainly few in the United States: few jobs, no real policy-making input, no positions of political power, no high expectations of young people's contributions to society.

A Mirror

A handy mirror for reflecting what may be adultist behavior is to ask oneself, "Would I treat an adult this way? Would I talk to an adult in this tone of voice? Would I grab this out of an adult's hand? Would I make this decision for an adult? Would I have this expectation for an adult? Would I limit an adult's behavior this way? Would I listen to an adult friend's problem in this same way?" And so on.

The Origins of Adultism

Most of the adult world's mistreatment of young people is not conscious and is certainly not meant to be oppressive. Adults think of youth as our national treasure, as our future leaders, as our precious descendents. Why, then, do adults fall into the role of disrespecting young people at such fundamental levels?

Without going into a major discussion, it is sufficient to point to our own experiences as young people. It was not much different for us when we adults were children. The mistreatment, disrespect, and hurt that we were subjected to conditioned us to internalize these attitudes. We are so soaked with these experiences that we have come to think of them as normal. Thus, as we reach adulthood ourselves, we unawarely turn towards younger people the same kind of treatment we received. This is what makes adultism so pervasive and acceptable. It is not our fault as adults, but it is our responsibility to transform these attitudes.

Implications for Our Work With Young People

The growth and development of young people towards playing roles as positive leaders, contributors, thinkers, and policy makers, will require the active participation of adults. The starting place is trusting that young people can make positive contributions to change.

A few general guidelines might be helpful as we proceed:

- Listen to young people. Really listen. In particular, listen to their thinking, their concerns, their experiences, their feelings, and what it has been like as a young person and as a student.

- Ask questions. Ask what they think about everything.

- Lay back. Curb our inclination to take over. Support the initiatives of young people.

- Validate their thinking. Welcome their ideas. This is where major invalidation has hurt them, and where encouragement makes the greatest difference.

- Be willing for them to make mistakes. Putting their ideas into practice will bring mixed results. They will learn. We need to learn to support the process of their taking leadership.

- Reverse the power relationships wherever appropriate. When, for example, can we refrain from using our authority, from making the final decision, from being the "real power" behind the youth leadership?

- At the same time, do not thrust young people into decision-making and leadership positions without training and practice and understanding of their responsibilities. Otherwise, we set them up for frustration, confusion, possible failure and humiliation.

- Always respect all young persons, no matter the age, and expect them to respect each other, at all ages. This is the starting point for reversing negative concepts of themselves.

- Have high expectations of their potentials, and a real assessment of their current abilities. Never sell them short and always be prepared to lend a hand with a difficulty.

- Do not dump our distress about them on them. They get this from adults all the time. It only adds more hurt. We need to take care of our upsets about them some other way with other adults.

- Give young people real and accurate information about the way the world works, about our experiences, about relationships and sexuality. Let them be proud of who they are and of the accomplishments and contributions that young people have made to the world.

- Be patient with ourselves when we unawarely slip into our old adultist habits. It will take time to undo them. Always appreciate how well we are doing.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING COMPONENTS

Leadership training is a vast subject. Students learn about leadership by any number of avenues including formal workshops, reading and study, role-playing, making decisions, on the job practice, observation, imitating others, osmosis.

The intent of this section is to offer you as the advisor/organizer of student government several key pieces of training for leadership: information, exercises, and hands-on workshop formats. You will need to adapt them to your particular school, of course. The topics are:

- Developing A Concept of Good Leadership
- Taking Minutes and Keeping Notes
- How To Lead Good Meetings
- Developing Goals & An Action Plan
- Creating A Position Paper
- Mutual Appreciation
- Mutual Support
- Self-Estimation
- Building Alliances
- Structures of Government

Note: We have arbitrarily alternated the use of the male and female pronouns in this training section.

DEVELOPING A CONCEPT OF GOOD LEADERSHIP

The officers and class representatives of the student government will have specific responsibilities, which they will need to be clear on, but it is extremely important to help them develop a general concept of what good leadership is. At first, young people tend to act as if leadership were simply speaking one's mind in a persuasive way. But, if asked questions like "What is leadership, what is good leadership?", they will develop a more sophisticated and useful concept of leadership.

Good Leaders and Bad Leaders

There are, we must admit at the outset, good leaders and bad leaders. We are not referring here to people who lead well and people who lead poorly. Rather, we are referring to people who lead in a way that benefits others and people who lead in a way that is destructive to others.

Of course, there are differences of opinion about this, and it is definitely a value judgment we are making. This value judgment must be made, and it must be raised for consideration by the young people. The classic examples are Martin Luther King Jr., on the one hand, and Adolf Hitler on the other. Both were clearly effective leaders, but one was redemptive and one destructive. A reading of Hitler's book, Mein Kampf, reveals that he certainly thought he was leading for the good of the world as he saw it, and so, apparently, did his followers. One must assume that bad leaders believe

in what they are doing. The power of human beings to rationalize is very great. Thus we must have our own criteria for judging good leadership.

One fruitful way to proceed with young people is to raise the issue of good leadership and bad leadership and ask for examples of both, and then have the group develop their own criteria. Any group of young people will come up with a significant definition of good leadership. The next section is a simple outline of a workshop format to use with young people exploring these issues.

A Process for Arriving at a Definition of Good Leadership

A simple process can be used with all groups to develop a concept of good leadership. The members can then assess themselves in relation to that concept.

1) In small groups of six to twelve people, have them make a common list of answers to the following questions:

- What are the QUALITIES of a good leader - that is, what kind of a person is a good leader?
- What are the FUNCTIONS of a leader - that is, what does a good leader DO?
- What are the SKILLS of a good leader - that is, what are tools needed to get the job done?

Good and Bad Qualities

One of the YAP student governments listed these ten qualities of a good leader: honest, responsible, organized, enthusiastic, positive behavior, speaks on behalf of his/her people, fights for what he/she believes in, willing and able, courteous, diplomatic.

Ten qualities they listed that were not those of a good leader are: bossy, insensitive, dishonest, undiplomatic, disrespectful, judgmental, disloyal, biased, unorganized, irresponsible.

2) Then ask each person to take ten or fifteen minutes to write down her own strong points and areas that need improvement to become a truly fine leader.

3) If the young people have some knowledge of each other as group members, the next step will deepen the relationships and trust a great deal. Ask each person to present her self-evaluation to the group. Then have each member of the group give feedback, always starting with full positive comments on the person's good aspects as a leader before making suggestions for improvement.

Each person will take about 20 minutes, so enough time must be given to this process if it is to work. This will always enhance the level of closeness and honesty as well as the consciousness of good leadership qualities and positive leadership behavior. It is worth doing at least once a year with any on-going leadership group. A good place to do it is in a leadership retreat, where there is enough time, and a mood of getting closer.

This process of mutual evaluation can also be used in other contexts with good effect. For example, if you ever have a weekend retreat for the student goverment, it is a good idea to close the retreat with a group process in which each person says what she did that made a positive contribution to the group and how she could have made an even better contribution. Then all members of the group offer their appreciations and their suggestions for improvement. This gives a good sense of closure and closeness to the group. Even those people, perhaps especially those people, who feel they have played a negative role get balanced feedback from the group that tends to relax them - at least they know exactly where they stand and don't have to be anxious about whether everyone hates them now. They discover that people don't hate them, but they do have specific suggestions for improvement which are attainable.

4) Depending on the time available, other questions that are interesting to ask are these:

- Who in history or in your life has been a good leader, in your opinion?
- What are the benefits of playing a leadership role in a group?
- What are the stresses connected to being a leader?
- What kind of support do people taking leadership need from others?

The young people will always answer these questions

intelligently, and the process of doing so will raise the consciousness and the standards of the group.

When Is it Good For People to Have Power?

When you discuss issues of power, one useful concept is the test of "The Three M's." The Three M's are Motivation, Mission, and Methods.

If the leaders' Motivations are of deep caring for the well-being of other people; if their Mission is to improve the well-being of others; if their Methods are those which enhance the physical, moral, psychological, and intellectual status of all the people they touch and if they do not rationalize destructive methods for a supposed positive goal, then it is all right for those people to have power. This, of course, could be elaborated in discussion more fully.

A General Definition of Good Leadership

In summary, young people usually concluded, in their own words, that a good leader is someone who cares enough to make sure that things go right for all concerned.

The following piece is used by the Youth Action Program Student Government Project.

THE ART OF LEADERSHIP

Simply and plainly defined, a leader is one who has followers. A leader deserves to have followers if she has earned recognition. Authority alone is no longer enough to command respect.

- A leader sees things through the eyes of followers. A leader puts herself in their shoes, and helps them make their dreams come true.

- A leader does not say, "Get going!", but rather, "Let's go!", and leads the way. A leader does not walk behind with a whip, but is out in front with a banner.

- A leader assumes that followers are working with her, not for her. She considers them partners in the work, and sees to it that they share in the rewards. A leader glorifies the team spirit.

- A leader duplicates herself. She is a "people builder". She helps the grow strong, because she realizes that the more strong people an organization has, the stronger it will be.

- A leader does not hold people down, but lifts them up. A leader reaches out her hand to help her followers scale the peaks.

- A leader has faith in people, believes in them, trusts them, and thus draws out the best in them. She has found that they rise to her high expectations.

- A leader is a self-starter. She creates plans and sets them in motion. She is a person of thought and action, both dreamer and doer.

- A leader has a sense of humor. She is not a stuffed shirt. She can laugh at herself, and has a humble heart.

- A leader can be led, and is not interested in having her own way, but in finding the best way. A leader always has an open mind.

- A leader keeps her eyes on high goals, strives to make the efforts of her followers and herself contribute to the enrichment and achievement of more abundant living for all.

- Source Unknown

HOW TO LEAD GOOD MEETINGS

Much of the work of student government goes on in meetings. Student government members will also need to lead meetings with different groups in the school and in the community. We all know there are good meetings and bad meetings. This section is about the art of leading good, successful meetings, a skill that the young people will have use for all their lives. It is addressed to "you", the young people.

If you're responsible for any on-going work group or committee numbering between five and twenty people, and you want to be sure the group hangs together and moves forward, follow these suggestions. If you do them all, and your personal style is in tune with the group, you'll find the work goes well and the spirit of the group stays positive.

- Memorize the following basic outline for almost any agenda:

Basic Agenda Outline

1. Touch base
2. Review proposed agenda
3. Read Minutes
4. Correct and approve minutes
5. Review tasks assigned
6. Old business
7. New business
8. Review new tasks & timeline
9. Arrange for next meeting
10. Evaluate
11. Appreciate

- Make sure everyone is notified of the meeting as personally as is practical or necessary to get them there. Make sure you know who is expected and who is not coming.

- Make sure everyone knows everyone else. Don't ever start a meeting without being sure everyone at least has a chance to learn each other's name and a little about each other, e.g., class, school, organization.

- Start with people making personal contact with each other. If that's not possible for some reason, make sure you touch base with everyone yourself, letting them know how welcome they are and that you are aware of whatever is still relevant from your last contact.

- Start on time.

- Welcome late-comers, introduce them, and explain to them what you are doing at that moment in the meeting.

- Inform the group of why the absent people could not attend. This establishes that you are in touch with them and they're still part of the group. They have reasons for being absent, and it is not an abandonment of the group. Further, doing this establishes the expectation that people will contact you if they have to be absent, and confirms to the people present that if they were absent they, too, would be treated with respect.

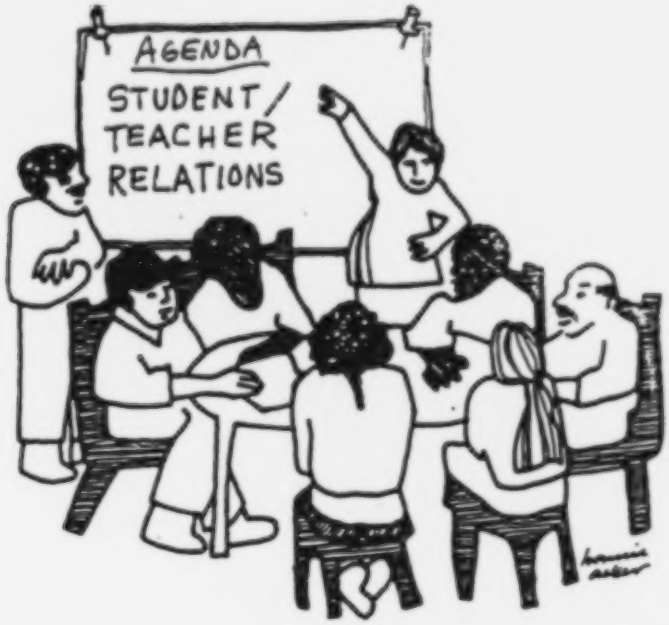
- Have a planned agenda, preferably one that people can look at on the blackboard, large newsprint, or photocopies. Otherwise, there is a tendency to fill up time with trivia - people need to be in on a plan so they can organize their own participation appropriately. If people feel the chairperson is using their time purposefully, they tend to be more responsible in their own use of time.

- Include time estimates for each item on the agenda. This gives people a sense of what is most important and where the meeting is at. If more time is needed for a particular item or for the meeting as a whole, the group needs to agree to extend the time.

- Include in your agenda a review of every specific responsibility that has been previously assigned and is still hanging. If people volunteered to do something, either check in to see if it was done or, if it was not done, what help is needed to finish it. If you already know it was done, give the person a chance to report, or appreciate him.

This doesn't mean that the time of the meeting should be spent helping people figure out how to do things - move this quickly, making time outside the meeting to give help if necessary. But, the group does need assurance that

everything is being moved forward and that responsibilities are not let dropped.



- Make sure every person speaks fully on every important decision or issue. Every person has important things to say, no matter how shy he is. Let nobody dominate discussion; let nobody be overlooked. A healthy group listens to the thinking of all its members - or it ends up losing the ones who have not been heard.

- If, despite all your efforts, one or more people remain silent or withdrawn from discussion, be sure to contact them personally before the next meeting to hear what was going on. They may have important objections to voice which they did not feel comfortable expressing to the group, and they may need your support in raising these points. Whatever their reasons, it will be important that you care enough to check in with them.

- Go for consensus on every important decision. Discuss until all important objections to the dominant view have been shared and explored. Discuss until the minority who disagree have been thoroughly heard and taken seriously.

If enthusiastic consensus cannot be reached, ask those in the disagreeing minority if they will consent to go along with the decision and review it after there has been time to test it in practice. If discussion has been thorough, this minority should be small, because the best ideas will have been incorporated into the majority position.

- Make sure that over time, no important area or concern gets repeatedly postponed. A group needs to make progress on all fronts. Even if your resources force you to make slower progress on some fronts than others, this should be stated clearly and a plan followed for when and how the concern will be handled.

If this is not done, morale will be lowered by the feeling that the group, or leader, is not able to handle its whole task. As a result, your other excellent work may be eroded by the weakness that develops from continually putting aside the less urgent concerns.

- Encouage laughter in your meetings. Serious discussions can get boring or tense; jokes and lightheartedness lift the spirits and bring people together. The work goes faster when people are more relaxed and tuned in. Refreshments also add to the relaxation of the group.

- At the end of every meeting, take a few minutes for a closing evaluation. Even a sentence from each person on how the meeting went - what he liked or what could be improved or how he feels - gives the group a sense of completeness. Nobody has to leave wondering how the others felt. If everyone liked the meeting, morale goes up 100% when this becomes clear. Take time for appreciating each other during this evaluation period.

- Keep good minutes of your meetings and make sure to distribute them to all members, and to all people who might want to know about your progress. This might be the Secretary's regular job, or you might want to rotate the responsibility.

All of the above are important. They may seem obvious once stated, but many groups struggle along for years without ever putting their attention to these important parts of working together. You can save a lot of disappointment and time by following these suggestions.

Successful Meetings

A Successful Meeting Accomplishes Five Things:

1. Communicates information
2. Results in decisions being made
3. Assigns tasks and responsibilities
4. Creates a good spirit
5. Helps build the organization or the group.

To Make Good Decisions:

1. Define the problem.
2. Think of all possible solutions.
3. Research missing information.
4. Consult people with relevant experience or wisdom.
5. Decide on best option.
6. Implement the decision.
7. Evaluate the results.

A Good Facilitator

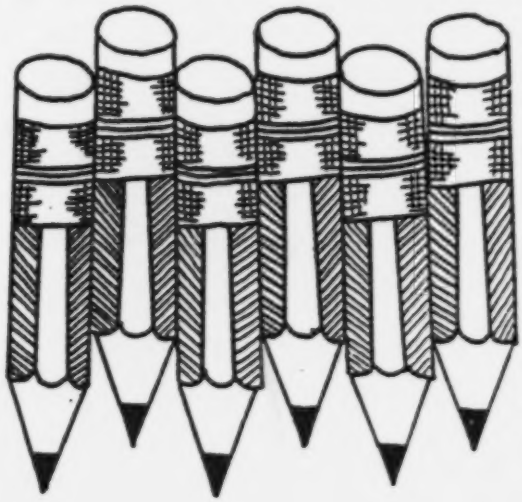
- Opens with personal sharings, song, good news, etc.
- Sets a positive tone
- Encourages the participation of all
- Speaks briefly, is not long-winded
- Does not allow attacks on people or intimidation
- Uses pairings or small groups to:
  - ensure participation by all
  - allow everyone to think through and express ideas fully
  - de-fuse tension
  - change the pace
  - handle work more efficiently
- Calls for a break, an "energizer," or stretch as needed
- Uses "equal time" formats when discussion is complex and energetic
- Keeps to the agreed-upon agenda and times
- Points out areas of agreement on controversial issues
- Summarizes consensus expressed
- Helps define areas to be resolved
- Asks for proposals for change, rather than tolerating demoralizing complaining
- Closes meetings with appreciations and hopeful note

TAKING MINUTES & KEEPING NOTES

The skill of taking notes and recording the minutes of meetings is rarely taught in schools and few young people know how to do it. It is very helpful to do repeated training sessions on note-taking skills. Even though it is only the Secretary's responsibility to take minutes, ask all the student government members to learn the skills. It will be helpful for the rest of their lives. What follows is one suggested format.

Purposes & Uses

Notes and minutes are used to record decisions, to reflect different points of view in writing, to remind members of responsibilities, to inform absent members, to clarify issues, and to document the process of the group's work.



Description of Minutes

There are many ways to take minutes, and many kinds of minutes. Minutes can be presented in chronological order from beginning to end of meeting, or by categories such as a) decisions, b) responsibilities assigned, c) reports, d) next meeting time, place, and purpose.

Things for note-taker to remember

- Record names of the facilitator or chairperson, note-taker, and all people present.

- Record the date of the meeting.

- Underline decisions made. "We agreed..." "It was approved...".

- Outline items. Be brief.

- Note who will do what between meetings, by what date, who will follow through on decisions.

- Read back minutes on important decisions to be sure they are written correctly.

- Record the date, place, time, agenda, and facilitator or chairperson of the next meeting.

- Make sure everyone gets the information they need, even if they did not attend the meeting. Create a file for easy access.

Practice exercise

After going over the information above, give the students a five-minute talk on a topic of importance, like "How to Run a Successful Meeting". Ask them to take notes. Then ask each student to read back his or her notes. Praise whatever notes the young people took, thinking of appropriate praise for the level shown. For example, "OK, good, that's a good start! You got the first point I made", up to "Excellent, you got it all!"

Repeat this process several times. Each repetition will produce better, more inclusive notes, and the information about how to run meetings (or whatever) will be more fully absorbed.

Everyone gets equal attention, and everyone's work is warmly received, and the commitment to developing everyone's skill is palpable, so it is usually pleasurable.

Asking student government members to keep notes as a regular practice will gradually refine their skills of listening, summarizing, and writing. Occasional evaluation and appreciation of the official minutes will help the Secretary improve her work, too.

DEVELOPING GOALS & AN ACTION PLAN

In order to define the goals of the student government and decide on an action plan, it is useful to go through a process similar to the following used by the Youth Action Program.

Defining the Problem

Ask students: "What is the problem you want to solve? Try to define it in one sentence. How would you devise a student survey to get some information on the problem? What are the underlying causes of the problem? What do you want the student government to do to remedy its root causes, not just its symptoms"?

Brainstorming solutions

Brainstorm some possible actions you might take to solve this problem. Use newsprint paper or a blackboard. List as many ideas as possible, no matter how wild, for five minutes. Do not evaluate as you go along. These ideas can be evaluated and made "realistic" later. Encourage people to build on other people's suggestions.

Have each person select a few favorite actions from the brainstorming list which seem promising for effective group action. Make a separate list of these. Ask for additions.

Choosing a Direction

From this list, select actions which are top priorities. Remember to include some actions that are bound to succeed. Make a range of short-term and long-term goals. For the group's morale it is essential to start on a positive note, so select a project that is do-able, measurable, time-limited, energizing, and important. On the other hand, it is sometimes good to do something that is dramatic in order to draw quick attention to the issue and the student government's initiative.

Assessing Available Resources

What personal investment is each person willing to make to work on this issue? How much time can each person give to it (meeting time and/or outside of meetings, etc.)? What knowledge, talents, skills, connections, materials, etc., do you have that you could contribute? Who outside the student government group would be supportive: other students, teachers, adminnistration, community leaders, parents, or other outside resource people?

Predicting Possible Obstacles

What barriers do you recognize within yourself, the group, or the school that might limit your ability to work on this issue effectively? Which individuals or groups would likely oppose the plan? What could be done about these obstacles?

Making a Plan

List three objectives (just to limit them) in relation to your project or activity. Then list all the steps and tasks to achieving each. Make a time-line: by when does each task need to be done. And finally, divide the tasks among the group members by developing working committees. Someone needs to be over-all in charge to make sure everything is being thought about, and that your supporters are kept informed of your progress and their role.

Evaluating the Work

All along the way, and at the end of the project, the group should evaluate its work: what went well, and what could be improved next time. Specific appreciations for everyone who had a hand in it and suggestions for improvement are need to complete the process.

CREATING A POSITION PAPER

The student government may want to lead a campaign to improve a certain aspect of the school. At an early stage in any organizing campaign, it is helpful to develop a "position paper" which puts forth a description of the problem and a proposal for solving it.

In some cases enough discussion and observation will have occurred so that the student government advisor or one of the student leaders can sit down when the time comes and simply write a draft position paper to be reviewed by the rest of the group.

Eliciting Analysis and Proposals

However, if you are starting from scratch, there is no better way to develop an accurate position on an issue than to consult widely with large numbers of people affected by and knowledgeable about the issue. Even if you have good ideas already, verifying and refining them through this process will give them greater legitimacy and accuracy. Once this needs assessment and consultation is done, a position paper can be written that will go to the heart of the matter.

When there is no young person skilled enough, an experienced adult can help lead the discussions and write the paper, based on the ideas of the young people. The procedure is straightforward.

First, the leader should meet with groups of students and ask them the causes and the possible solutions to the problem under discussion. If the issue is, for example, violence in the schools, they will come up with an array of causes that cover everything: boring classes, too little

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communication between different ethnic groups, too little youth involvement in the running of the school, drugs, anger about the world that young people take out on each other, racism, gangs, not enough love and attention from adults, not enough recreational activities to bring people closer together, etc. They will make complementary proposals for improvement.

Writing a Draft Position Paper

After enough discussions, certain patterns of perception will appear. Primary causes and best-liked solutions will begin to surface. Categories of causes and solutions will become clear. The discussion ideally should help answer whether the needed changes require a policy change in the school, or a program change, or a change in the allocation of resources (money, time, space, staff, etc.), or an attitudinal and behavioral change.

A good writer can then organize the material into a paper which persuasively communicates the collective thinking of all the young people. If there is a young person who can help write it, all the better.

Feedback, Editing, and Final Adoption

Once the paper is done, the young people who contributed their thinking should be reconvened to read and respond to it. They will have additions and adjustments to make.

The paper should be edited as suggested, and then if the group is easily accessible, redistributed for their final review and approval. At this point it becomes the position paper of the group, and can be used for the improvement campaign

Winning Support

Once the position paper has been written in final form, it can be distributed to key people who need to know and and can help: for example, faculty members, the administration, student clubs, the PTA, outside resources people or organizations, etc. Personal presentations to key people who can help effect change prove to be very effective.

Summary

The principle of collecting and organizing the best thinking from a large number of people, and then feeding it back to them in an organized form for their agreement is one which can be used in every context. It is the means of

developing unity around a program which crystalizes the most brilliant ideas of the constituency into a form they can rally around. This is a key role of good leadership. It is worth the time it takes.

MUTUAL APPRECIATION

The simple act of appreciating each other makes a qualititative difference to the functioning of any group.

Nobody ever gets enough appreciation. Nobody ever gets as much as he deserves. On the contrary, most people, especially young people, are insulted and put down in direct and indirect ways much of the time. Therefore it is important to do the opposite, to appreciate people freely and frequently.

It is a simple matter to structure appreciation into meetings and gatherings. At the end of almost every meeting, take the time for every person to be appreciated. This always brings smiles, chuckles, relaxation. Suddenly any mounting boredom or impatience subsides. At the Youth Action Program, we have seen a group of 30 young people stay an extra hour at the end of a long meeting just to hear the appreciations that people give each other.

The Appreciation Go-'Round

One simple format is to have each person say what he likes or respects about the person sitting on his right or left. For slight variations you can have everyone appreciate the person two to one side, or three to one side. Sometimes, if you are aware of a tense relationship in the group that

would preclude a sincere appreciation, you have to choose a format which will skip over the existing conflict. You don't want to accidentally spotlight a problem when you are using a process to bring people closer.

Spontaneous Appreciations

Another variation is to invite two or three spontaneous appreciations for each person from whoever wants to offer them. This has the advantage of people's giving their most heartfelt appreciations. It has the disadvantage of making people nervous when not as many people leap to appreciate them as might leap for others. Silences are deafening in this format. Thus it takes a little more skill as group facilitator, because you may have to intervene in some way, smoothing over the nervousness or making the potentially embarrassing feelings explicit in order to relax people. But it's more spontaneous, and some groups respond better to the spontaneity than to the structured go-'round with everyone assigned to appreciate someone according only to seating arrangement. These latter are, however, safer for most groups, even though you sometimes have to settle for the very minimal, "Well, I don't know him too well, but he seems like an all right guy."

Mixed Cards Appreciation

Yet another variation is to give each person in the group an index card on which they write their names. On a signal, they pass their cards to the left or right, and keep passing them, until the signal to stop. Each person then writes an appreciation of the person whose card they are holding. Repeat this passing and writing for three or four more times, as time permits, then return the cards to their namesake, each of whom then reads all the appreciations out loud, and then keeps them.

Helpful Explanations

Lots of adults are uneasy "imposing" a "forced" structure of appreciation on a group of young people. But when it's explained correctly, the young people embrace it delightedly, even the most apparently cynical ones.

Explanations can be more or less elaborate, as appropriate. But it's always good to explain the underlying reasons so the young people can understand what's going on and why.

Following are various levels of explanation, just as examples:

"I believe that nobody in the world gets as much respect and appreciation as he deserves. Just about everybody is always trying his hardest, and hardly anybody ever really notices. In fact, people get put down all the time, especially young people, and it hurts. So in the student government we don't put anybody down; we put people up."

OR,

"Part of being an effective leader is learning how to help build unity in groups. People feel better in groups when they know they are appreciated, and then they speak more freely and participate more fully. Appreciations help people to feel comfortable and accepted in the group."

OR,

"Part of the discipline of being a leader is to see the best in everybody. If you can't see something to appreciate in a person, it just means you haven't seen him fully, you've been distracted by the things you don't like. But if you really look at him deeply, you will see something about his struggle, the obstacles he is trying to overcome, the positive things that bring him here, his contributions; then you'll be able to appreciate him."

OR,

"I believe every human being is born good, and every human being is doing his very best at every moment to become the best person he can. It's not always easy and it's not always obvious to the observer, because so many things have happened to hurt people; they don't always act good. But inside of everybody is a good person, waiting to be seen and understood. When you dislike somebody you're really just disliking the effects of all his past mistreatment. It always helps to look past the annoying things about a person, to look for the heart of gold, and when you see it, say so."

This last rap is controversial. Most people believe there are good people and bad people, and when you don't like someone you're justified. Whom you like and whom you don't like is normal conversation for almost everybody. But still, it is important to put out this controversial position; it will ring true to many people who may have been waiting, unbeknownst to themselves, to hear somebody say it. Whether people believe it's true or not, it can be very reassuring to hear the leader say it, because it means you can expect the leader to look for the best in you, even if nobody else does, and even if you've lost sight of it yourself.

It is also very important to build an expectation that anybody who takes on extra responsibility, who puts himself out front in any way, will be appreciated by the group. Routinely the chairperson, the spokesperson, the person who gets the refreshments, should all be appreciated, and it should be made explicit how they helped the group. This becomes a ritual, a tradition that the group will carry on with just a little encouragement.

It is very common in our society for the leader of anything to get attacked. We try to reverse that. The person who takes resonsibility should be supported and appreciated, never attacked or taken for granted or rudely criticized.

You cannot develop good leadership in an atmosphere where leadership is not appreciated!

MUTUAL SUPPORT

Why Suppport?

True leadership includes caring about each other as we work to improve our school, our community, or our world. Caring about each other includes paying attention to how we feel, and what is going on in our personal lives. Any ongoing group will quickly come up against three major sources of stress that interfere with the work.

Sources of Stress

- The nature of school life itself.

The context in which student government works is often full of stress: overworked teachers can get irritable; adultist mistreatment of the students can cause much tension; poor, dirty, or under-supplied school facilities can be frustrating; homework can be anything from too difficult to downright meaningless; violence and drugs can make a school a dangerous place; abusive students can make teachers angry; low student morale may make any effort to change things extremely difficult. Unless we take time to unload them as they accumulate, the feelings tend to pile up and make us feel discouraged, or burnt-out, or angry, or hopeless. This is true of adults and young people alike.

- Personal difficulties.

In addition, each of us brings to school and to the student goverment meetings a baggage-car full of personal hang-ups, bad feelings about ourselves, poor habits or attitudes. Most of these are simply the results of hurtful experiences we had in the past which have not been resolved. We never asked for these hurts, but each of us got huge loads dumped on us. As a result, we might be feeling badly about ourselves, or lack confidence, or expect people to criticize us, or compete for attention too much, or get irrational in meetings, or always come late, or not follow through with what we said we would do, or feel like we can't think about "goals" or "policies," or feel competitive, or want help all

the time. These personal difficulties often undermine the group and our effectiveness in work. This is true of adults and young people alike.

- Societal Mistreatment.

Furthermore, we must do our work in a society which keeps different groups separate and misunderstanding each other: Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native, and White, female and male, younger and older, Jew and non-Jew, working class and middle class, gay and straight, etc. Many of us have deep scars of hurt and mistrust. Racism and sexism divide our schools into cliques, gangs, and groups prejudiced against one another. Even people who have become quite aware of racism or sexism or adultism make mistakes in relating to each other. These issues show up in every group sooner or later.

To function at its best, a group needs a process of discussing, de-fusing, and understanding issues rising from differences of class, race, sex, culture, and age.

The Need for Support Is Obvious

Thinking of these three sources of stress should make it clear why it is crucial to build emotional support into the heart of our work. Assisting each other to heal the pain we have suffered in our lives helps us care more deeply about each other, think more clearly, act more confidently, and become more effective in our leadership. Freeing ourselves from past hurts will make us stronger, more effective leaders. The world will change as we change ourselves.

Following are some suggestions and models for developing support.

Personal Support Groups

There is much personal support which happens informally in most groups. However, having a formal "support group" is very helpful. The basic idea is for people to gather together as a regular group simply to listen to how it has been for each other on a feeling level. Small groups of five to eight are best, since this size allows more time for each individual. If your group is larger than eight, divide it into smaller groups. Protect the time by meeting in a room where you will not be disturbed, by allotting enough time (one hour minimum), and by emphasizing that everything shared during support group time is confidential.

We realize that most student government meetings will not have enough time for this kind of support group. In this situation, you might arrange to hold it after school, once a week, or alternate the weekly student government meetings between business sessions and support groups.

Simple Process

Begin with each person in turn sharing something that is going well for her. The purpose of this is to remind the group members of the positive aspects of their lives, despite how they may be feeling at any one moment. Beginning this way usually raises the tone of the group, provides chances to celebrate each other's good news, and draws their attention away from what might be upsetting them. (Oftentimes young people will insist that nothing good has happened in their lives. If so, the adult guide can humorously but sympathetically point out some terrible thing that could have happened but didn't, to get them smiling with the awareness of how much worse it could be.)

Then divide the remaining time equally among those present, each taking a turn to be listened to by the others who pay attention actively, looking at the speaker with warmth, caring, and no judgment. This is the heart of the process: learning how to listen to one another in such a way that people feel encouraged to share what is troubling them. Each of us is eager for someone to really listen and be interested. It seems that in day-to-day life, each of us is continually checking out the people we are with in a computer-like calculation, assessing how safe it is to share what is going on with us. When people are listened to with respect, warmth, and lack of judgment, they spontaneously begin to bring up what is bothering them at the moment.

As trust develops in the group, individual members will deepen their emotional sharing with a natural releasing of

feelings: tears, fears, laughter, anger. This is healing and should simply be accepted with understanding.

Background Theory

Given enough safety, encouragement, and time, we are eager to tell someone how it really is, and was, for us. If someone listens to us attentively and warmly, over time we will cry about the losses, disappointments, and endings in our lives; feel scared about things we couldn't admit before; laugh at the embarrassments; and feel the flashing rise of anger and rage about injustice we have witnessed. Whenever we listen to a person's life story, we are usually inspired by the heroism in her life, and how well she has survived, given everything that has come down on her. Each of us functions as well as we can, despite emotional distress. Intuitively, we know that we would be better off it we lightened that load. This is our natural intelligence at work.

The short-term effect of releasing feelings in these ways is that we clear our heads somewhat and function better. Having a good talk about a problem will not make the problem go away. But a good talk usually enhances our ability to deal with the problem. The long-range effect is that we begin to recover from the difficult experiences that made us feel insecure or unloved, or made us act timidly or overaggressively, or got in the way of intimate relationships, or made us think we were stupid, selfish, and incompetent, or any of a host of other ways our human functioning was interfered with by the hurtful experiences that came our way.

Guidelines

The following concepts and guidelines help such emotional support to flourish:

- Feelings are just feelings. They are not reality. They don't need to be acted upon. The more intense the feeling, the less likely it is to be a useful guide to action. Intense feelings often cloud our thinking. We can just let the feelings be shared and released, so they don't continue to distort the way we see reality. Simply accept the feelings, occasionally reminding people that they do not need to act on the feelings, just dump them out, and later they'll be able to figure things out better.

- Avoid giving advice or even telling similar experiences. People need our attention so they can release the distress feelings that interfere with their OWN thinking.

- Maintain strict confidentiality. That is, do not tell anyone outside the group what the person shared, and do not bring it up again to that person, unless he or she initiates the discussion.

- Remember to distinguish people from their feelings. People can temporarily have very bad feelings. They need others to know that these are not permanent and not "who they are." It is most helpful to view the people always as wholesome, creative, essentially loving, very smart, and capable. And whenever they are not like this, some stress, old or new, has made them act differently.

- Sharing meetings work best when there is one person in charge, to see that the time limits are kept, to remind people how to listen, if necessary, and to think about how the whole group is functioning.

- It is good to close the sharing with some form of affection-sharing or appreciations of each other.

- Suppport groups such as these work especially well on week-end retreats, when a general context of safety and trust has been built, and people are away from their day-to-day frustrations.

Support Group Format

5 min:	Opening sharing-good news (1 min. each)
45 min:	Individual turns-equal time (7-8 min each)
5 min:	Closing-appreciations

SELF-ESTIMATION

Support and regular practice of appreciation will help student leaders grow in their roles. There are times also when the leaders need to evaluate their work in order to improve it. They need to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes. And they need to commit themselves to change what interferes with their work or relationships. But the effort to give feedback can be hurtful and damaging to growth. At worst, a person is raked over the coals by the group criticism. At best, a person is confronted with his troublesome behavior out of love, and offered a hand with it.

A Simple Process

We have found that a method called "self-estimation" goes to the heart of the need for change without rupturing relationships. The process is simple and straightforward. Each member of a working group, or sometimes simply the person whose work is to be evaluated, tells the others what he thinks he did well, and then what needs to be improved or changed next time. Each of the others then tells him the same from his perspective. Almost always, what they were dreading having to tell him in a critical way is put forth by the person himself as something he was aware of, and usually feels badly about. Then it is much easier for him to accept suggestions from others about it, and for others to offer help where needed. This process usually avoids the person having to feel defensive or hurt.

Emotional Support Afterwards

In the ideal process, self-estimation is followed by members of the group listening to the person describe the feelings which made him act less effectively. Emotional release of the feelings right then is a key aid to changing the behavior in the future. To the extent that group members have pacticed the emotional support method discussed earlier, this will be a healing and empowering process.

BUILDING ALLIANCES

In order to make important changes, it is usually necessary to get the support of many different people and groups. A school community is a very complex environment, with many constituencies, often with differing interests. To carry out a particular project, a student government may have to build alliances from among diverse racial and cultural school populations, different language groups, age and grade levels, male and female, parents, teachers, different school departments, the administration, support staff (cooks, janitors, nurses, etc.), different schools, the Board of Education, and the wider community.

The following are some activities and strategies developed by the Youth Action Program Student Government Project to promote greater unity among some of these diverse constituencies.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Teachers are often forced to play the day-to-day role of the enforcer and the authority holding the power over students. However, most teachers do not have much more power than the students. They are mostly overworked, underpaid, and resentful at having very little policy role on the important matters which affect school life. However, given the opportunity and the forum to develop better and more effective communication, students will find they have many potential allies among the teaching staff and the administration. This is important for the student government leaders to know. We suggest several concrete strategies for having students take the initiative in improving their relationships with teachers.

1. We encourage students to get to know the teachers outside of class, as human beings.

2. We sponsor student-teacher public forums to discuss issues of concern in a respectful and mutual way. This is highly successful at promoting understanding and developing more common points of view.

3. The student government holds an annual "Teacher Recognition Day", complete with certificates, flowers, words of praise, and a luncheon. This public acknowledgment of the value of the teachers is greatly appreciated by the staff.

4. An annual student-teacher volleyball game adds fun and humanness to the relationship.

5. Student government officers present their concerns to teachers' meetings, asking for teachers' ideas about how to solve a problem, and proposing their own.

6. School conferences are held which include workshops on student-teacher relationships, led by a panel of students and teachers.

7. Student government officers engage teachers in individual discussions of issues as they prepare to select priorities for action and develop position papers.

Parents & Community

The active involvement of parents and the wider community can be key in developing a healthier school. The YAP Student Governments suggest the following:

1. Enlist support for a specific school campaign by making formal presentations at the PTA, the local merchants association meetings, or other community organizations, explaining the project and how parents and others can help.

2. Send them simple newsletters or flyers to keep them informed after that.

3. Sponsor regular Youth Conferences which, in addition to live entertainment and learning activities, feature displays by dozens of community organizations informing students of the services and opportunities available in the community.

4. Invite parents to help organize or cook for a school activity.

Cooperation Among Schools

We have also created the East Harlem Association of Student Governments which gathers student leaders from the schools across the community to talk on a regular basis and make plans for issues which face the young people in common. This tends to increase understanding between different neighborhood, cultural, and school groups, and results in greater strength to tackle issues.

RACIAL AND CULTURAL ALLIANCE BUILDING

Many schools have a rich diversity of backgrounds among students from different races, nationalities, and religions. Because of racism and prejudice these groups are often in conflict with one another: Blacks and Whites, Puerto Rican and Dominicans, Cambodians and Italians, etc. A student government may inherit a tense school situation where much work may need to be done to build good relationships and unity among various groups. There are many ways of healing the divisions among racial and cultural groups, including:

- making personal friends
- interrupting racist or other oppressive jokes and comments
- taking personal pride in one's own background
- organizing to hire more teachers from the same backgrounds as the students
- learning about the history and struggles of people different from oneself
- initiating workshops on eliminating racism
- organizing Black Awareness Day, or Puerto Rican Awareness Day, etc.
- setting up a student task force to examine the school textbooks for evidence of racism
- holding a school assembly or conference in which representatives from the different racial and cultural groups in the school talk about what is like to be Black or Dominican or Jewish or Central American or whatever
- initiating direct action to eliminate racist policies or behavior in the school
- standing up for each other across the racial divisions
- working on behalf of each other's issues.

Both institutional racism and personal prejudice must be combatted.

At the Youth Action Program we have found that sharing about our racial and cultural identity is a good way to begin on the personal level. What follows is a workshop we have developed which you might find useful.

Workshop Introduction

Racial and cultural identity are of enormous importance to every young person, yet very little explicit attention is usually given to it, because many adults are afraid to open up these issues since they are so emotion-laden for themselves.

But it is not so difficult to open them up and begin thoughtful and sometimes emotional exploration. Not to do so leaves the young people at the mercy of the negative stereotypes which they pick up automatically in our society.

It works well to raise issues by giving a little background, a few assumptions and concepts, and then by asking questions for people to explore. Following is a sample introduction:

"Part of becoming good leaders, and becoming our best selves, is shedding the negative ideas about ourselves that we have taken in as we grow up. Almost everyone comes into the school with a lot of bad feelings about themselves. It's not their fault. These bad feelings have been laid on them from the outside. People have put them down. People in their families, in school, in the neighborhood, in the police station, in the welfare department, have often put them down verbally or have denied them their rights.

"Today we're going to talk about oppression and identity. Does anyone know what oppression is?

"Right. Oppression is when people are consistently mistreated by society, when they are denied equal opportunities and access to justice, prosperity, education, freedom, and development of their full selves.

"Oppression takes many forms, and it's different for each group of people. The oppression of women is different from that of men. The oppression of Black people is different from that of Puerto Ricans. The oppression of poor people is different from that of rich people. But if you look very closely, and listen deeply to people from every background,

you will find that every group of people suffers from some form of systematic mistreatment that tends to force them into a distorted human role. Some forms are more damaging and vicious than others, but almost all people have been forced into some role or position that they would not have freely chosen for themselves.

"For example, from birth, women are told that they must serve men and be ornaments for them; men are told they must fight and be willing to kill without shedding any tears; Black people are told they must work and toil to enrich other people and to settle for little for themselves; White people are told they must stick to their own kind or be rejected by them; rich people are told they are worthless and stupid and contemptible if they don't continue amassing wealth. Of course, it's different for each individual and family, but in general you can trace certain messages given to every identifiable group in society. People tend to believe these messages and act accordingly. We call this internalized oppression. Because it is taken inside people, it becomes internal to them.

"Then there's external oppression. It comes from the outside. It's when people can't get a job because of the color of their skin or their sex; it's when people get beaten just because they're young; it's when people get lynched or denied housing, or raped, or beaten, or jailed, or kicked out of school for their color, sex, nationality, choice of friends, or political ideas. This is direct external oppression. It is not just a put-down, it's a direct mistreatment coming from outside.

"But all through history, every group has done its best to resist oppression, to fight for its full humanness, to make progress toward justice and equality. Much of human history is really the struggle of oppressed people to gain freedom and equality.

"It's important that each of us know our history, and get the information we need to be proud of our own people and to contribute to the on-going human struggle for a better world for everyone. Every one of you comes from a proud history of people struggling to be free, to be strong, to be loving, to make a better world. Some groups have been beaten down by superior force or by vicious trickery, but that doesn't mean they didn't try to resist. It is human to resist mistreatment, and to try to improve the world.

"But to improve it we need to understand who we are, where we come from, what has been done to our people, how we have tried to stand up for ourselves, and how we can change things in the future.

"Let's begin exloring these questions. Each of us has an

identity of race, nationality, sex, religion, class, sexual orientation, and geography that we carry around with us. Let's each take two or three minutes to share, what is that identity? How do you identify yourself in terms of culture, race, nationality, religion, sex, politics, or whatever figures into your idea of yourself?"

Small Groups - Mixed Identities

After a short go-round in the whole group, it is helpful to get together in small groups of four or five, in which each person has 8 to 15 minutes to share his life history from the point of view of how his identity developed. "How did you learn you were an X? What did your parents teach you about what it meant to be an X? Were you treated in any particular way by society as an X? What was it like to grow up as an X in the world today?"

These first small groups should be randomly integrated groups. People are eager to cross the barriers of racial and class prejudice. They want to share their stories with each other; they want to know and be known by people with different backgrounds than their own. Oftentimes they have not had the opportunity to tell their story or hear other people's stories in a deliberate and open way.

It's often good to structure this with ten minutes to tell each story, and five minutes for the group to ask questions. This reassures each person that the group is interested, and that she is telling the other people what they actually want to know.

Similar Identity Groups

After people have met in mixed groups and shared their stories, creating a more cohesive whole group, it is useful for people to group together in similar identity groups to answer together the following questions:

- What's great about being x?
- What's been difficult about being x?
- What do we want other people to know about us?

Then a report back to the whole group from each sub-group leads to a greater sense of understanding and diminished fear of discussing these issues. It also leads to greater unity within each identity group. This is desirable and important, because unity with other groups works best when it's based on unity within one's own group.

Reasons for Resistance

Be aware that virtually every group will reveal itself to have members who are quite scared to be divided into like groups. There will almost always be resistance at first. For some Black people it reminds them of segregation, and they don't like it; for some White people who are determined to be good allies of people of color, it focuses them on their whiteness, for which they feel others won't like them. Some people feel least comfortable among groups of people like themselves, because in fact they have been most hurt by the people closest to themselves.

In running this kind of workshop it helps to give lots of latitude for laughter as people are setting up the groups. The facilitator must never assume what identity group or groups a person belongs in, and should invite from the group a list for the blackboard of all the identity groups which are present in the room. Most people belong to several, and the choice of which one they meet with is full of feeling.

It must be remembered that the development of any limited identity has been imposed by society, and is in itself partly an indication of the effects of oppression, or in its positive side an indication of the group's determination to survive and challenge oppression. There is no reason why every person couldn't have an identity as a human being, citizen of the world, except that we have been forced into more limited ideas of who we are. Some of the narrower identities are delightful, positive, and proud, based on a rich history; but they are also usually attached to perceived roles, expectations, and historical relationships which are rooted in oppression.

Respect Choices of Identity Group

It is, therefore, important that the group facilitator not continue the imposition from society by insisting or assuming that a person must identify in a certain way, or must choose on this particular day to meet with a particular identity group. For example, a Puerto Rican who is blonde and was raised with White people may not choose to go with the Latin group; a bi-racial brown-skinned person with a Jewish father may choose to meet with the Jewish group and not the Black group. A dark-skinned Dominican might choose to meet with the Black group instead of the Latin group. A Jew who was raised as a Methodist may not choose to go with the Jewish group. These and millions of other choices must be respected and welcomed, all as part of a life-long sorting out of who we really are as human beings.

Of course, the facilitator must be sensitive to whether a particular group is ready to divide into identity groups. It may be appropriate to have lots of general sharing and repeated grouping into diverse small groups to share many different experiences before people will accept identity groupings. The art of facilitating is to know what is the right next step for a group to go deeper, get closer, be more thorough and open in their sharing and their discussion and their setting of goals.

Be Prepared for Feelings

A person leading this kind of workshop must also be prepared for the fact that the feelings connected to identity run deep and strong, and when the waters are stirred the feelings will often surface as tears, anger, trembling, and a lot of laughter if the group is relaxed. This is to be expected, and it's fine. It's not an indication that the group is over its head, or that anything bad is happening. This is just what happens because there is a lot of pain stored in these memories and these enforced identities. The facilitator needs to be calm and reassuring in her acceptance of feelings. However, if feelings begin to surface in the form of direct emotional attacks on other individuals, these need to be firmly interrupted because they will have negative effects.

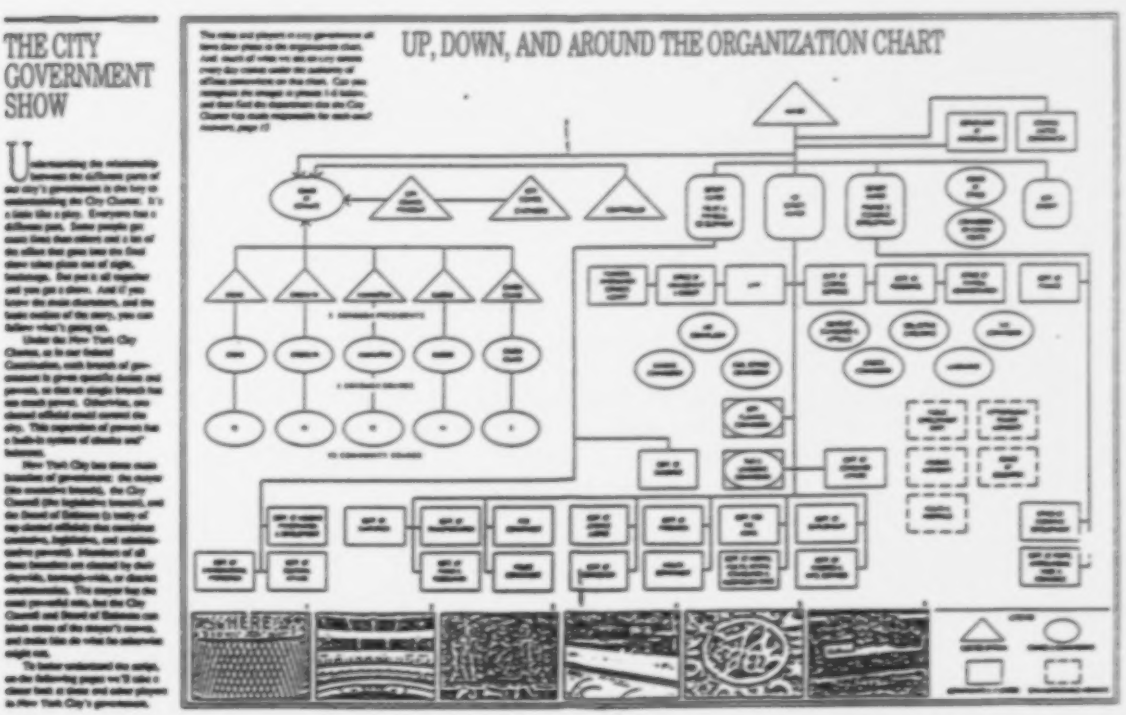
The content of this workshop applies equally well to adults and young people, and it is important for adult staff to explore these issues with each other before opening them up with the young people.

THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

It is very important for student government leaders to learn about the power, the influence, and the structure of democratic governance. Without going into detail, we simply list here some topics of importance:

- the structures of local, city, state, and national governments
- the elected officials who represent them in those structures
- the legislative process
- the structure and personnel of the Board of Education
- parliamentary procedure
- recent controversies in their community and who took which positions

Visits to local elected officials to ask a series of questions the students have prepared in advance, and to present a point of view on school issues, are usually very exciting and should be arranged.

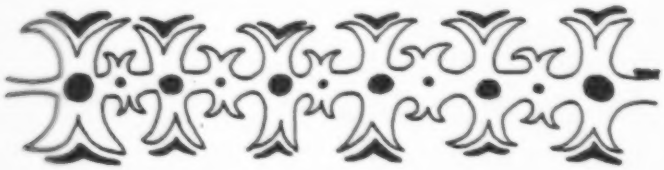

THE CITY GOVERNMENT SHOW

UP, DOWN, AND AROUND THE ORGANIZATION CHART

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Of course there are always intangible and unpredictable reasons for the success of a project, but student governments tend to flourish when the following factors are present:



Trust and respect from teachers and adminstration.

When the adults in the school, through their actions and attitudes, respect the thinking and initiative of young people, have high expectations of them, and truly empower the student leaders to make a difference, young people will rise to the level of expectations. In concrete terms this will require teachers and administrators to allow the class representatives to report on the meetings, to participate in student government sponsored activities, and to otherwise support the work of the student government.

A good adult advisor or organizer.

A faculty member, or other adult (e.g., a community-based youth program staff person ala the YAP model), needs to take on the role of Student Government Advisor. When the advisor believes in the student leadership, trains students to be effective, and develops good relationships with them, then the young people grow in their skill and confidence. It is crucial that the adult has good relationships with the faculty and adminstration and can be a bridge and an advocate for the student government.

An early start.

If the student government is in place early in the school year it allows for more training of the leaders and more impact on the school. It is best to have the class representatives elected within the first two weeks of school, so they can get the rest of the election process going.

A representative government.

To the extent that the government has representatives from the different age groups, ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds, and social groupings within the school it will be more successful in uniting the student body on projects. Obviously, the advisor and class reps who carry out the campaign and election process need to give special attention to this issue. In a school where conflict and division has marred student life, much time may have to be spent on building alliances among groups and fostering unity.

Regular meeting time and place.

The school needs to provide the student government with a regular time and place to meet, at least weekly. This is important to maintain consistent attendance, momentum, and identity. It is also a basic respect to the student government.

Adequate training for leaders.

This is key. Constant attention to leadership development will help students become increasingly effective. Part of this training is formal, and part is "on the job". But repeated sessions on the qualities, functions, and skills of a good leader, appreciation of leaders, chairing of meetings, planning agendas, creating unity, and running programs will pay off. Weekend retreats are the most effective forum for training.

Open student-staff dialogue.

Since any significant improvement in school life will require the cooperation of students and staff, the adults in particular need to be willing to participate in real dialogue and relationships with student leaders. This dialogue can take many forms: informal talks, official forums, debates, regular meetings, negotiating sessions, even volleyball games. When communication between students and adults is easy and frequent, school improvement has a much better chance of succeeding.

Good communication with student body.

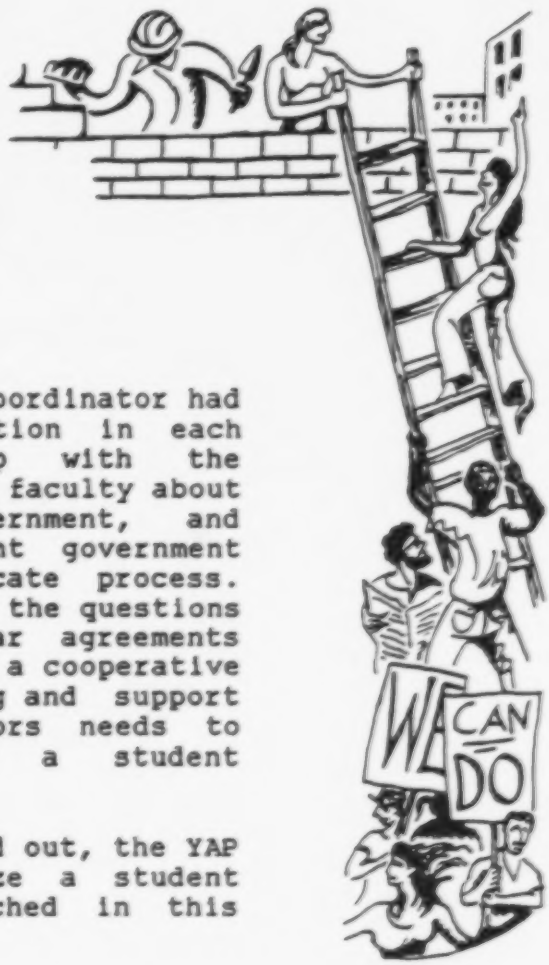
To carry out its goals, the leadership of any organization needs to be in good touch with its constituency. In schools, the student government can have a newsletter, a bulletin board, assemblies, reports in class, special announcements, flyers. Best is when the student leaders themselves are leading the assemblies and making the announcements. The officers might systematically visit each homeroom early in the year to make themselves accessible, answer questions, and ask students what they would like to see changed in the school. Any school improvement campaign will require similar visits to homerooms.

Cooperation and support from parents.

Parents like to see young people taking responsible roles in the community. Parents can be of great help to the goals of the student government if they are kept informed and involved. The officers can visit the PTA meetings occasionally and send a letter home with each student explaining the goals of the student government, and its current activities.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE YAP MODEL

The Youth Action Program Student Government Project is a unique model for organizing student governments. It involves the interfacing of a community-based organization and a school. It presents certain advantages and certain difficulties which bear discussing.



The Process

The YAP Student Government Coordinator had to first approach the administration in each school, develop a relationship with the Director or Principal, talk with faculty about the need for a student government, and volunteer to act as the student government advisor. This can be a delicate process. Care must be taken to answer all the questions and concerns of the staff. Clear agreements need to be made to better insure a cooperative relationship. Firm understanding and support by the teachers and administrators needs to precede the establishment of a student government.

Once these steps were carried out, the YAP staff person set out to organize a student government along the lines sketched in this manual.

Special Advantages

Because the organizer of the student government is based in a community organization rather than in the school, it has been possible to provide student government members with

opportunities and responsibilities which go beyond their own school. For example:

- All student government members attend weekly meetings of the East Harlem Association of Student Governments. This Association was set up by the Youth Action Program to strengthen leadership and build unity and cooperation among community schools.

- An officer represents the student government at YAP Policy Committee meetings, once a week. This is the governing board of the Youth Action Program, and a source of on-the-job leadership training, with real program responsibility.

- An officer also represents the student government at meetings of the Coalition to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy, held once a month. This local Coalition was also set up by YAP and serves to get student governments active on this most pressing issue.

- Student government members attend the periodic Youth Action Program General Meetings and leadership retreats. These include reports from each YAP project, including Student Government, discussion of issues facing young people, plans for future action, and leadership training. The meetings and retreats put the student leaders in a bigger community youth context, and keeps them involved with leaders in other projects.

These unique duties of student government members add to their leadership development, create bridges among the schools and the community, and serve to inform the student government on wider issues which affect the young people in their schools.

YAP's Student Government Project has been very successful. The school administration likes it because it complements the school's overall objective of developing competent, educated, and responsible students. The student government members like it because they get the attention of a staff member from YAP who is trained and committed to developing their leadership. The staff person builds close relationships of mentoring, support, and friendship with many of the student leaders. YAP likes it because it broadens the base of their youth organization. The community likes it because it expands the number of young people playing a positive role.

Special Difficulties

The position of the YAP Coordinator is a delicate one. The Coordinator is employed by a community-based organization but is working in a public school. She must balance the

agendas of the CBO and the school. When, for example, the students raise criticisms of the administration or school policies, the YAP Coordinator must handle it in a way that does not polarize the relationships between staff and students. It is sometimes tricky to figure out how to support the young people in their leadership while not alienating the adults, and without jeopardizing her own role as advisor.

Sometimes students, feeling empowered by the good training of the Coordinator, will decide to do something well beyond what she would advise. At times the Coordinator or Advisor would find herself in an awkward position of having to mediate between the administration and the student government. Always, the Coordinator must handle these situations in a skillful, creative, and democratic way.

And finally, there can be a conflict of priorities of activities or time lines between the school and the CBO. Patience, flexibility, and constant communication in both directions are called for from a person in this position. Cooperation among all the the components is key to the overall success of the student government.

Conclusion

Of course, we think that the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. There are student governments now where none existed before, and more to come. YAP and the schools have been delighted with the development of student leadership. The students, because of their involvement in the Youth Action Program, have participated in a broader youth program focused on positive change.

We encourage other community-based youth organizations to explore similar arrangements with your local schools.

We are excited by the possibilities: Young people are capable of making responsible decisions, being positive role models, and bringing about significant changes in their schools and community. Student government can play a major role in developing their leadership.

For more information and assistance, contact:

Youth Action Program
1280 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029
(212) 289-1113

YOUTH ACTION PROGRAM PLEDGE

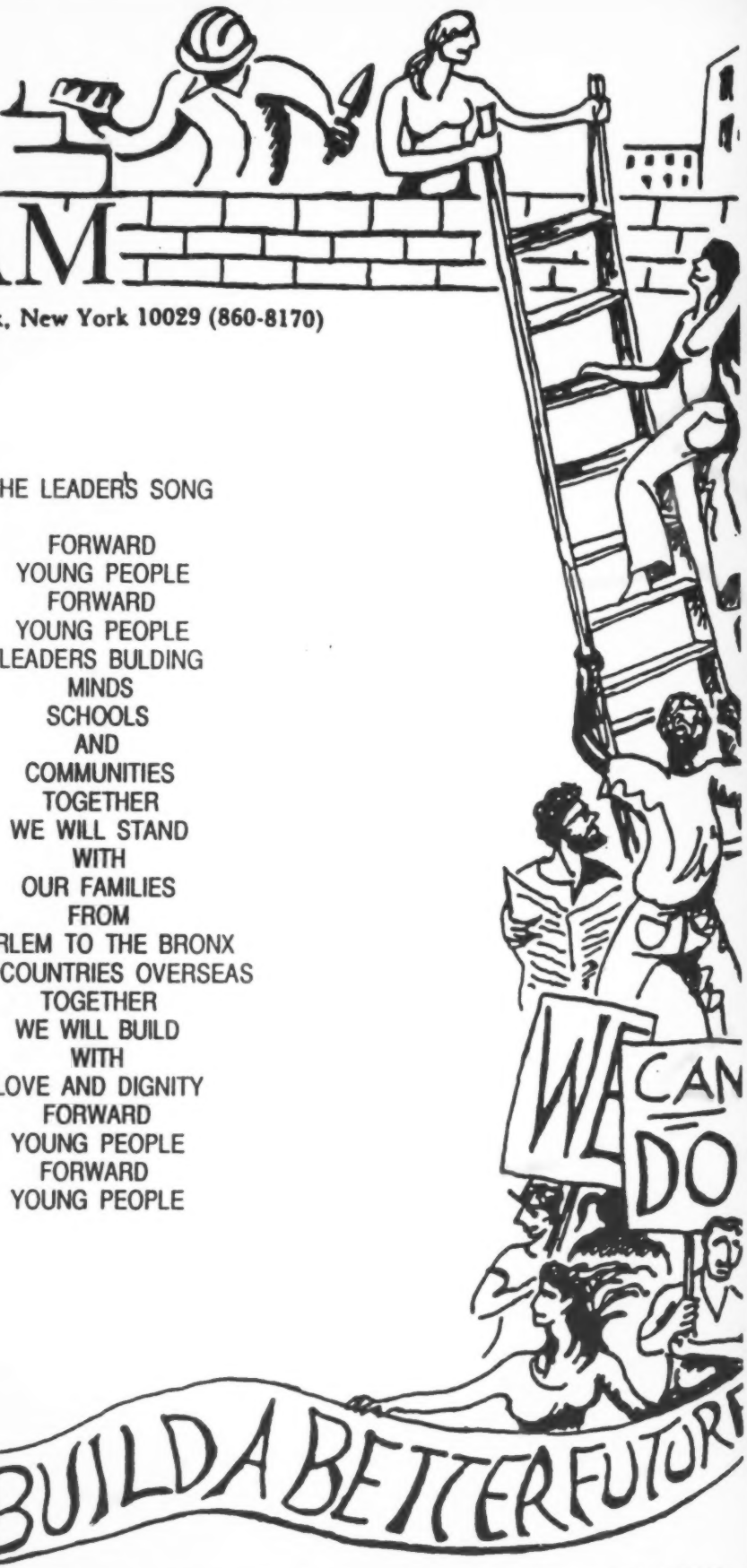
We, the members of the Youth Action Program, pledge that we are working together:

- to improve and rebuild our community
- to relate to each other in cooperative ways
- to develop our potential as leaders
- to educate and improve ourselves and help others along the way
- to respect our peers, neighbors, and all life
- to be part of a great movement for justice, equality, and peace.

All this we will do with love and with dignity.

YOUTH ACTION PROGRAM

1280 Fifth Avenue (109th St.), New York, New York 10029 (860-8170)



THE LEADER'S SONG

FORWARD
YOUNG PEOPLE
FORWARD
YOUNG PEOPLE
LEADERS BULDING
MINDS
SCHOOLS
AND
COMMUNITIES
TOGETHER
WE WILL STAND
WITH
OUR FAMILIES
FROM
HARLEM TO THE BRONX
AND COUNTRIES OVERSEAS
TOGETHER
WE WILL BUILD
WITH
LOVE AND DIGNITY
FORWARD
YOUNG PEOPLE
FORWARD
YOUNG PEOPLE

The Youth Action Program provides adult organizers to help East Harlem young people create community improvement projects. projects include the Youth Action Construction Training Program, the Young People's East Harlem Resource Center, the Youth Action Special Community Forces, the East Harlem Youth Congress, the East Harlem Student Government and Pregnancy Preventi Project, three "I Have A Dream" classes, and the Coalition for Twenty Million Dollars. The Youth Action Program is a divis of the East Harlem Block Nursery, Inc.